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DE RUEHCI #0097/01 0981211  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 081211Z APR 09  
FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2333  
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2858

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000097

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: CASTE, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT TO  
DETERMINE PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN BIHAR

REF: KOLKATA 35

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Politics in Bihar is dominated by regional parties pushing their caste interests. Bihar's Chief Minister (CM) Nitish Kumar heads the Janata Dal-United (JDU) party, presently a member of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and is winning over Bihar's poorest and lowest caste citizens through new affirmative action initiatives and a focus on governance and development. The NDA is helped by Kumar's image as an effective CM after 15 years of perceived government mismanagement under Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) administration. Indian National Congress's (INC) failure to negotiate a seat sharing deal with the RJD and Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janashakti Party (LJP) does not bode well for the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) and may result in an influential "Fourth Front" swing vote in determining the next coalition government. End summary.

¶2. (U) Bihar is India's third most populous state, with 83 million people and 40 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats (lower house of parliament). Polling will be conducted in four phases on April 16, 23, 30 and May 7. Bihar, often cited as India's poorest and least developed state, has large Hindu and Muslim communities (82 and 16.5 percent of the population), with small numbers of Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. PolOff drew on meetings with politicians, party members, journalists, NGOs, and businesspersons in Bihar (Patna and Gaya) from March 23-27 to prepare this report.

#### Bihar's History of Caste Politics

¶3. (U) At the time of India's Independence in 1947, Bihar's political leadership was dominated by upper caste Hindus (mainly Brahmins and Thakurs) who now constitute approximately 13 percent of the population and represent the landowning ruling elite. This group has traditionally aligned with the Congress. The major low caste communities include the Yadavs (14 percent of Bihar's population), Paswans (Eight percent) and the Kurmis (five percent). (Note: figures given for caste/community populations are very rough estimates). In 1979, the Janata Party-led national government appointed the Mandal Commission to design an affirmative action program based on caste, social and economic backwardness.

¶4. (U) The Janata Party disintegrated with its activist mentor Jaya Prakash Narain's death in 1979. In 1988, India's anti-Congress secular leaders united to form the Janata Dal (JD). In 1990, Prime Minister V.P. Singh (leading the JD government in Delhi) implemented the Mandal Commission's recommendations, ushering in caste-based reservations in government jobs and education. This enabling legislation

signaled the end of Bihar's caste coalition and the emergence of new parties breaking from JD, including the RJD, the LJP and the Samata Party which was later reborn as JDU. These parties share certain common traits. All remain caste-based parties led by community leaders and Narain protigis, including Lalu Prasad Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan and current CM Nitish Kumar. Mandal-empowered low caste Biharis shifted their votes from the national parties to these community leaders, leaving little political space for national parties like the Congress and the BJP.

#### Parties and Personalities

15. (SBU) In 1990, Lalu Prasad Yadav swept Bihar's state assembly elections, winning 122 out of 324 state assembly seats due to strong support from Yadav and Muslim voters. (The new state of Jharkhand was created out of Bihar in 2000. Post bifurcation, Bihar assembly's strength is now 243 seats.) Lalu Prasad, who went on to serve as CM for seven years, is widely viewed as a corrupt and ineffective legislator. In 1997, facing serious corruption charges, he was forced to resign and reportedly had become such a liability for the JD that he was forced to split from the party to form his own political party, the RJD. Despite his poor reputation, contacts credit Lalu Prasad for the RJD's success in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections (RJD won 21 out of 40 Lok Sabha seats) and report that his reward was the influential and financially lucrative post of Union Minister of Railways. Under Prasad's leadership, Indian Railways has had a significant financial turnaround and contacts believe that Prasad has effectively used the position to increase his influence in Bihar politics. His wife, Rabri Devi, is currently the leader of the opposition in the state assembly.

16. (SBU) In 2000, Ram Vilas Paswan, a leader from the Paswan low caste community, split from the JDU and formed the regional party LJP. The split was an outcome of the power struggle

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between Paswan and Lalu Prasad Yadav whose traditional support base is the Paswan caste members and Muslims. To date, Paswan has not won major support in the states, winning only 4 Lok Sabha seats in 2004 and ten state assembly seats in 2005.

17. (SBU) In 2003, Nitish Kumar, a member of low caste Kurmi community, formed yet another JD break away party, the JDU. In 2005, he formed an alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who has traditionally won the votes of Bihar's upper castes, and together they won 143 out of 243 state assembly seats. Both fans and critics acknowledge Kumar's positive effects on development and governance in Bihar, so much so that some people now speak of a "pre-Nitish" and "post-Nitish" Bihar (see Reftel). Contacts told PolOff that over the past three years, Kumar has steadily expanded his support base across a wide range of social and religious communities. He introduced a series of affirmative action schemes for lower castes, appointed two Muslims from poor communities to the Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament), and introduced a 50 percent female reservation in the three-tiered panchayat (local governance bodies) system. A Patna-based representative of the international organization UNICEF remarked on its positive collaboration with state civil servants and improvements in social development indicators. Representatives from NGOs and the business community in Gaya, a district three hours south of Patna, also confirmed the popular perception of the positive developments made by the Kumar state government.

#### The Power of Development and Governance

18. (SBU) While local political analysts opine that caste may still be the best predictor of voting behavior in Bihar, there is general consensus that development and governance will influence the Lok Sabha election. A CNN reporter in the state capitol of Patna told PolOff that "for the first time an issue other than caste [governance and development] will be considered in the election." Contacts predict that this shift will benefit

the NDA. Kumar has taken these issues to the grassroots. Prior leaders may have also enjoyed mass appeal, but implementation of electoral promises lagged. Since January 2009, Kumar has been reaching out to Bihar's villagers through his Vikas Yatra (development march). During such tours, he stops at a village every 25-30 km and spends a few hours meeting residents before reviewing development schemes with officials. These outreach programs can potentially upset caste equations.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) The RJD and LJP's decision to offer just three Lok Sabha seats to the INC, and the subsequent tie up with the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh are clear signs of an effort to consolidate the Yadav, Dalit and Muslim votes and create a distance with the national party. But if RJD and LJP have sought independence from their erstwhile UPA ally in the pre-poll period, Nitish Kumar has hinted at the possibility of a post-election reworking of alliances. "We are now in NDA. Who knows where we will be after the elections," Kumar remarked in a recent television interview. The INC's decision to contest all of Bihar's 40 parliamentary seats may present the party the opportunity to embark on a long journey to rebuild its presence in this part of the predominantly Hindi-speaking heartland. But it will also convert Bihar's elections into a triangular contest, which will work in favor of Nitish Kumar. In Bihar, similar to as in Orissa, regional parties, unable to predict post electoral outcomes, are keeping their alliance options open.

¶10. (SBU) Caste will continue to play the predominant role in Bihar's Lok Sabha election, ensuring that parties such as RJD, LJP and SP win some seats. With Kumar making inroads in Bihar's caste politics with his affirmative action and good governance programs, the state's traditional voting patterns have become less certain. And with Kumar also hinting that he too can dump his NDA ally - as Naveen Patnaik did in Orissa - there is no clear advantage to any of the two national parties. Even the potentially powerful RJD-LJP- Samajwadi "Fourth Front" can become important kingmaker at the center if it can protect its caste alignment.

PAYNE